Carole Burns

104 Taff Embankment

Cardiff, CF11 7BH

United Kingdom

3,740 words

The God Who Was Himself Whispered In Her Ear

If she could lose herself in the story, Serena thought, she could get over their fraught morning. The audience in the airy, white lobby of the Wales Millennium Centre began to settle down as the storyteller walked onto the stage, crossed it once or twice, then stood, tall and still, his long blond hair in a 1970s ponytail, his face bright red as if he’d “caught the sun” (one of her favorite new phrases). This is so British! she thought. In an alternative kind of way, not in a way she could have ever imagined in the States. Her plan of steeping herself in Britishness to soothe the homesickness she always felt when she and Rich argued was beginning to work.

The audience fell silent – even the customers in the cafés, the people streaming past on their way to other events, seemed to quiet into a hush as the storyteller began.

“One day — ” his chin jutting out as he spoke – “a fool found an ancient coin on the ground near a wishing well. Roman? the fool wondered, intrigued for a moment.”

Rich shifted next to her as if already bored. “... no great find in this ancient land.” Unless he was still angry? *Stop it!* She shut her eyes as she sometimes did when she was read to, trying to take in the story, the storyteller’s voice, trying again to block out the sense of loneliness that had come over her that morning like nausea as she waited for Rich to return from the distant planet of his ex-wife, every other person she loved an ocean away. *Listen!* she whispered to herself.

“… no point selling the coin on eBay; he would use it to make a wish. But what should he wish for? He might have been a fool but he knew people less foolish than he had blown their wishes on silly, selfish, superficial desires – for money (which never brought happiness) or beautiful women (who didn’t love them). And when he finally thought of his – to be a lucky man – he tossed the coin toward the wishing well. It arced into the air, and as it was falling as neatly as a rugby ball kicked by a Wales No. 10, a magpie flew from nowhere, caught the coin in midair, and vanished again. Our friend didn’t even have time to salute the lone bird and cancel out the destiny of sorrow that the single magpie had just delivered to him.”

“ ‘Enough of this nonsense,’ the fool said to himself, and to anyone else who would listen. ‘Wishing wells and magpies, my foot. I’m going to find God and find out why I’m so unlucky.’ And so he left, walking over hill, down into the dale, across the M4, and into the forest…”

The small audience laughed. Serena was pleased that she, too, had gotten the British jokes – even the rugby reference, though there was no way anyone could live with Richie and not learn to love sports a little (well, except for you-know-who). She caressed his leg, stole a quick look to see how he was, her rather anglicized but still fellow American. Pubs, Welsh rugby, Indian food were what he liked about the U.K. Cathedrals, male voice choirs, storytellers were not. He smiled back vaguely.

Good enough, she thought. And as she listened, rapt, eyes open now, the storyteller began to take the shape of the characters in his fable: optimistic, like the fool, as he stepped lightly, springily, from one end of the stage to the other; his deep, reedy voice threatening, like the hungry wolf in the forest as he asked the fool to seek God’s advice on where he might find more food. Upright and thin, the storyteller became the straggly tree that asked the man to find out why it could drink no water despite being planted by a clear blue lake. With his thick, yellow locks, the man turned into the beautiful woman in the pretty red house and a green, green garden, who asked the fool to find out from God why she was still so unhappy. Finally, the storyteller became the God whom the fool, once he finally tracked him down, found juggling apples in a tree, telling the man, as the apples went round and round, round and round, mesmerizing the audience with the hint of eternity, that luck was always there for the finding: go look for it.

“So the fool took God’s advice,” the storyteller said, “and turned around to set off for home. On his way, he passed the beautiful woman once again, who wanted to know how he had fared. ‘Well,’ the fool told her happily, ‘God said that I simply need to go find my luck.’ ‘And did you ask him about me?’ She spoke tentatively, not knowing if she wanted to hear what this God had to say. ‘Oh yes,’ the fool said, ‘you are unhappy because you have no one to share your life with; beautiful things are always better shared.’ ‘Well, man,’ she said, reaching her pale arm out to him lightly, ‘would you stay with me and share my house, my garden, my life?’ The fool answered immediately. ‘Oh no, I can’t. I must go find my luck!’ And off he went.”

Serena stole a look at Rich. Was he listening? He clasped her hand and rolled his eyes at her; he was enjoying it despite himself.

“And when the man reached the tree and related what God had said, the tree, too, asked about his case. ‘Oh yes,’ the man told him, ‘God said that there is a treasure buried in the roots of your tree. You must find someone to dig up the treasure, and then your roots will be free to soak up water again.’ ‘Oh, man,’ said the tree, ‘would you be kind enough to dig up that treasure for me?’ The fool responded immediately. ‘Oh, no, I don’t have time, I must go find my luck!’ And off he went, through the forest, where he again met the wolf, and he repeated his story. ‘And what,’ the wolf growled, ‘did God say about me.’ ‘Ah, yes,’ the man said. ‘He said you must eat the first fool you see.’ And so — ” the storyteller stood motionless, for a moment, then his voice rang out like a laugh “ — the wolf did.”

As the audience clapped, Serena found herself close to tears. Was this her fate, too — would Richie never see? Their argument, leading a train of other, similar arguments, came rushing back. Didn’t he know he had to appreciate what life had thrown his way? But this was an old story for her and Rich, too. She turned away so he wouldn’t detect her tears.

Rich watched with part affection, part annoyance, as Serena went up to talk to the storyteller. He liked her American habit of having to meet everybody, talk to everybody, tell everybody how good they were. He still, found it refreshing, as if his twenty years in the U.K. had made him one of them; it wasn’t something Beth would have ever done. Would ever do, he corrected himself. She wasn’t dead. Sometimes, though, he wished Serena could make a quicker exit.

The Millennium Centre was crowded on this Saturday afternoon in April; people rushed to the Bay on these rare sunny days, families mostly, or couples on their own, streaming through the arts centre as if was part of a tour. He liked the inside of the building better than the hulking outside (it looks like Darth Vader, Serena always said): the way the stairs angled up two stories past the balconies, how the words cut into the steel façade at the front became, from within, just geometric patterns like the stairs and the balconies. It couldn’t have been an easy place to perform – perhaps the storyteller’s presence of mind was as impressive as his story. The space echoed like a playground: the screeching children, the chattering parents, the chairs like park benches, the cafés the ice cream truck, the banisters the slides. He felt a pang: how he missed his daughters, his family, the Saturday afternoons when he and the girls and maybe Beth, if she were feeling well, would have ended up here, too.

Serena was still standing happily at the back of the queue of people waiting to speak to the storyteller; she had let a few people go ahead of her, so she wouldn’t feel rushed. Rich wished suddenly he had gone up with her, was holding her hand; for as she reached the man and leaned forward to speak, her flaming red hair flashing over her shoulder, the storyteller stood taller and looked around him with a ridiculous, twinkly smile as if wondering if anyone else was noticing his surprising stroke of luck. Amid the couples walking past hand in hand, children skipping ahead of their parents, Serena and the storyteller stood in their own bubble, their bodies dipping toward and away from one another, exchanging business cards, cash and a CD.

Then Serena was standing in front of Rich as if she had been spirited there from the future. He kissed her quickly, hoping the other man would see; she was all atwitter. “He lives in Canton!” she said excitedly. “I’ve invited him to dinner!”

They left the Centre to take the walk they had planned, passing the petite black-roofed Norwegian Church (“it’s so *cute*,” Serena said again) then reaching the barrage that stretched over the Bay to Penarth, where they’d stop for lunch. This walk was the main reason he’d agreed to hear the storyteller, though it would have seemed churlish not to after their argument, after she’d said how homesick she’d felt. Beth had asked him to come to the house to watch the girls for just half an hour, Serena telling him, quietly, She. Can. Bring. Them. Here. Crying when he’d said he’d be right back, it made more sense to go there. And it had. Serena seemed better now, the storyteller, the walk over the Bay, doing its trick. “Maybe we could take the girls to see him,” she said, her head bopping up and down beside him as she walked with her little bounce, “he says he does children’s events, do you think they’d like this walk, though it’s too long, maybe we could take the ferry over and walk from the Penarth side, they’d love that!” A little girl ran by with her nose dripping in the chill air, but with Serena buoyant next to him, his thought – he’d wipe his own girls’ runny noses with his bare hand – had lost its sting.

This was how he needed her to be – his beacon through all this darkness. “Shine bright,” he wanted to tell her. “Keep shining bright.” Instead he pulled her to the side of the bridge and kissed her. “You’re gorgeous – do you know that?” She kissed him back through her smile, her eyes wet from cold or tears or maybe both, her breast pushed against his chest. He adored her. Her cold soft cheek against his, her girlish excitement about the storyteller, even her emphatic tears this morning as he left the house because he couldn’t wait to get back to her; he was bound to help Beth first but he couldn’t wait to escape to Serena. “What the hell are we doing on a bridge?” he grumbled into her ear. So they went home, to bed, Serena pointing out in the car, “God *did* say to find our own luck,” at home pulling off his jeans, “we are lucky, lucky, lucky” kissing his stomach, wrapping her legs around his waist, “lucky, lucky,” until she couldn’t speak for moaning.

Months later, Serena settled into a couch in the storyteller’s house but did not look at him as he talked and talked, as her new friend tended to do, the new friend whom she had somewhat purposefully chosen to make plans with for the evening – the evening Rich was having dinner with his daughters at his ex-wife’s house without her. Serena would never be invited to celebrate the girls’ graduating from nursery school, or to celebrate anything else. Ever. Rich went anyway. Distraction, she needed distraction, she couldn’t possibly sit home and stew over Rich’s cozy family dinner, and she knew the storyteller, raconteur that he was over coffee, at her and Rich’s house, and now at his own home, would distract her. He had the knack of seeming as if he was paying attention just to her, or whoever else he was talking to – though Rich thought it was just Serena. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. So Rich said. He didn’t much approve of her friendship with the storyteller, but tonight he couldn’t exactly complain.

Now, at the storyteller’s house, she was stewing nonetheless. Did children really graduate from nursery school? It sounded like a lovey-dovey aren’t-our-children-wonderful fabrication concocted by Beth to pull Rich into her web. It sounded American, even, as if she’d begun using tools from her enemy’s arsenal. *We can celebrate with the girls ourselves!* Serena had said, *And we will!* Rich had said. But the real celebration, the one that counted, Serena knew, was tonight; theirs would be a weak afterthought. Enough, enough. She remembered the storyteller used to be a clown. Maybe he could perform some slapstick for her: pretend to bump his head on the door, trip over the step into the kitchen. He had performed for twenty years with his wife, he’d told her a few weeks ago, until she moved out. He didn’t seem haunted by her, though hints of his past, his own sadness, snuck out now and then – in some ways it was why she liked him.

She dared to look at him – she’d been avoiding his gaze all evening – and his blue eyes, startling in color, but also startling in expression, as if they’d just seen something absolutely amazing, were watching her as if waiting. He stood up quickly and stepped toward her then away then went over and picked up an apple from the cluttered coffee table as if he might juggle just one then sat down again. Books, a small flash light, a tea cup, a pair of castanets, were strewn across the table like an unruly still life; she wondered if he gathered them for inspiration.

“Your stories were great the other night,” she said. “I wish the girls could have come.” Beth had switched nights on Rich at the last minute (more bullshit). She tried to mention Rich and the girls when she could with the storyteller, when naturally she might. It seemed necessary. “Rich didn’t have the girls after all.”

“That’s a shame. Though another venue would be better for them.”

She nodded. He had told the story again of the unlucky fool, but this time she was listening alone in a small café, Rich staying home to watch a football match instead. “You didn’t juggle,” she said.

He laughed. “Forgot the balls. I added the juggling right before I told it at the Millennium Centre. I don’t know if you noticed but a few people laughed at that part of the story — friends. Because I used to end my act that way, juggling. So I had made myself God.”

“The story makes me tearful,” she admitted.

“Oh, why?” He asked it casually, off-hand, as if this were still a light conversation.

Here was territory she hadn’t entered with the storyteller; confessing her problems with Richie seemed another kind of invitation which she didn’t want to extend. Yet did. “Well, you know. It’s people not seeing what’s in front of them. The treasures in front of them.”

“Ah,” he said. “Carpe Diem.” The storyteller looked strangely at her, then down at the apple in his hand.

“What is it?” she asked. “I’ve made you sad again.” Was he thinking of his ex-wife? Serena always worried that she dragged his grief out of him as if he were Rich; out, out, damn spot, out. She didn’t want to make the storyteller sad just because she was – but what was it then? “I can’t read your face.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know why you’d say that.”

And she thought for a moment that he didn’t agree with her interpretation of his tale – isn’t it obvious? she almost said – then realized he didn’t understand what she’d said right then, about the sadness in his face.

Rich left his old house – his ex-wife’s house – and headed home. Not his new home – he imagined telling Serena – just home. He wanted her to know it was how he thought of it in his head. He would tell her that, he thought, unlocking his door, calling out into the seemingly empty house. “Serena? Sweetie?” He would tell her that was what he thought on his way back from Beth’s, give her that small gift in exchange, as recompense, for what he suddenly could see might have been a difficult night. “Serena?” But she wasn’t home. The house seemed especially vacant, though it always did after leaving the girls. He packed away all the girls’ toys to send back to Beth, although Serena didn’t understand why some toys couldn’t live here. His insistence that it was neater always seemed foolish after leaving the haphazard mess of girly objects in Beth’s house.

She must still be with the storyteller. He’d been dying to come home to her; feel her body; remind himself why he had done all this. He wondered if he should worry.

Then the phone rang out. His heart lifted and he went over to pick it up. “Hi Sweetie,” he answered to deep silence.

“Uh, Beth, actually,” his ex-wife said.

She’d called because she had forgotten to discuss arrangements for the weekend, though really the plans were the same as always. He’d pick the girls up around six, giving Beth an hour to spend with them after work; he wasn’t sure what variation she needed to discuss. *She does this on purpose,* he could hear Serena say, *so she can call you again, here.* But it wasn’t true, he knew Beth, she was just forgetful, he wouldn’t admit even the slightest possibility of manipulation on her part, even if Serena wasn’t the only friend who’d called Beth manipulative, even if for half a second after each extra phone call he suspected Serena might be right, but they were wrong, they didn’t know her.

He and Beth confirmed their weekend plans and she thanked him for coming over for dinner. “The girls loved it,” she said and he flushed with pride. *This is why,* he would tell Serena, *This is why*.

“So that’s what you call her then?” Beth said. “Sweetie?”

Rich stood still. What was he supposed to say? Yes?

“I mean, I’m so glad you came over, it was so good for the girls, but this is so—“ she began to break down, the tears coming fast now, “so hard for me. I can’t believe how hard it still is, I still don’t understand, why, why did you do this, how could you do this *to them*, why…”

“Beth, please,” he said. He let her cry at him for twenty, forty, he’d lost track, maybe sixty minutes. *Hang up*, he heard Serena say. Thank God she wasn’t here.

“Can I try your piano?” Serena asked the storyteller.

So many books and CDs and magazines and even a bright orange wig perhaps from his clowning days, or his ex-wife’s, were piled on top of the keyboard cover that Serena wondered about the symbolism of these obstacles – he had clearly not been the piano player in the house. She was about to tell him not to bother when he began moving the items away.

“I’d be honored,” he said, and he whisked them onto the coffee table, the window sill.

“Are you going to juggle all this?”

He obligingly tossed one light book in the air and looked pleased to catch it on his head. *S*he laughed so he threw another backward, bouncing it off his heel. And then the piano was clear. She lifted the lid to reveal the ivory keys. “Now you’re entertaining me,” he said.

“Oh, I’m not very good,” but she tinkled a few notes while she leafed through his music. Not too out of tune; maybe he did play. “Will you juggle to Ragtime?”

He shook his head. “Play something serious,” and he leaned against the windowsill.

She looked back at him and stood to shuffle through his partner’s Chopin, Mozart, Beethoven, then she put it all away and sat down again. “This is my homesickness singing,” and she played Shenandoah. “Oh Shenandoah, I long to see you,” half singing, half humming the words, “mmm, hmm, mmm, you rolling river,” thinking of home, of Richie, of the blackness in his eyes when he missed his girls, of the emptiness in her when he wasn’t there, “hmm-hmm-hmm, I’m bound away,” her voice low, and the storyteller hummed a harmony above her, their voices mingling. He stepped closer and stood beside her near the bench, his hand close to her shoulder. The god in his story whispered in her ear: *Carpe Diem*.

She stopped, her head down.

“Serena.”

She felt him breathing next to her, waiting. The sound of the silent piano filled the room. He could touch her now, he could kiss her. Would that help?

“You know your story?” she asked. “About the unlucky man?”

“Yes?”

“I always think it’s Richie being the fool, not appreciating his life. Not appreciating me.” She looked up, tears wet on her face. “What if I’m the fool?”

“Ah,” he said, and stepped away. She turned back to the piano and clinked on a few keys. She wondered what he would do now, from the distance she hadn’t meant to create.

“Play it again,” he said. “I’ll juggle to this.”

And he stepped across the room gathering the apple, a ceramic pear that he’d said his sister-in-law had made, an orange. “This song’s too slow!” Serena protested but she heard her own voice, lighter, laughing, and the notes from the piano flew off her fingers fast and jolly. He turned to stand before her juggling the three objects, apple, orange and pear going round and round, round and round.